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## God and his spokesman

*Please read Leviticus 1:1-2*

On the night I was ordained a minister of the gospel, the presiding minister presented me with a copy of the *Presbyterian Service Book*. In it were orders of service for Sunday morning and evening worship and special occasions, complete with prayers and Bible passages to read, and suitable hymns to sing. It was not compulsory to follow the forms outlined, but for a new minister it was helpful to have a guide, especially when conducting marriages and funerals. Leviticus is a bit like a service book for priests in their duties as ministers of the old-covenant worship. Unlike church manuals, this book is God's Word and contains mandatory instructions that are often very detailed.

### **An introduction**

The opening words serve as the heading for the whole book as well as introducing the first major section, which takes us up

to the end of chapter 7. These chapters present regulations for the five main sacrifices. There are instructions for the people (1:3–6:7) and for the priests (6:8–7:38). We must see these rules within the context of the covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. They are for the maintaining of fellowship with the holy God. At the same time the introductory verses provide a link with the closing chapters of the previous book of Moses. Exodus concluded with the setting up of the tabernacle in the wilderness of Sinai and the glory of the Lord filling the place. Leviticus begins with God speaking to Moses from the tabernacle. It is important that we remember the context. The many laws that we find in this book were not given in a timeless setting, but against the background of God's deliverance of his people from Egypt to bring them, first to Mount Sinai, and then to the land of promise.<sup>1</sup>

### **God's voice**

Leviticus opens with a very solemn introduction. God is the subject of the first sentence and he is referred to as '*the LORD*' (Jehovah or Yahweh). This is God's personal name and it became very precious to Israel as a result of the Exodus and redemption from Egypt. Normally, we read of God speaking to Moses (see 4:1; 5:14; 6:1; etc.) but here he '*called to Moses*' as well as '*spoke to him*' (1:1). This call is not in the sense of naming Moses, or calling him to discipleship or service. It is a summons that introduces special revelation. The combination of '*called*' and '*spoke*' emphasizes the importance of the communication.

The living creator God who first spoke to Moses at the burning bush is the same God who made promises to Adam and Eve, to Noah and to Abraham and his family. He acted to further those promises by delivering the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery and bringing them to the foot of Mount Sinai. It was

there they heard his thunderous voice proclaiming the Ten Commandments and there they formally accepted the special relationship that God graciously entered into with them. It was this God who now summoned Moses and spoke further words of revelation to him.

The New Testament reminds us that this same God, 'who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his Son' (Hebrews 1:1-2). Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation. He not only passes on God's Word, but he *is* God's Word, the one who displays the perfection of God's character and in whom all God's saving promises are realized.

### **God's presence**

God had already summoned Moses three times. He called out to him from the bush (Exodus 3:4), from the mountain (Exodus 19:3) and from the cloud (Exodus 24:16). Here God called '*from the tabernacle of meeting*'.

There are two words used for the tabernacle: one emphasizes that it was the place where God chose to live and meet with his people or with their representative (*mishkan* = 'dwelling place'; see 8:10; 26:11);<sup>2</sup> whereas the word used here reminds us that it was a portable structure (*ohel* = 'tent'). When Israel moved from one place to another then the tabernacle was taken down and transported to the new site.

Before this tabernacle, with its furniture, was constructed according to the plans revealed to Moses (see Exodus 25:1 -31:11), a temporary 'tent of meeting' was pitched outside the camp as a result of the golden-calf incident (Exodus 33:7-10). This was the place where God ordained that he would meet with Moses until

the proper 'tent' or 'tabernacle of meeting' was built. Some think it is this temporary structure that is being referred to here. This is unlikely. When the official tabernacle was set up in the middle of the camp (Exodus 40:17–33; Numbers 1:53; 2:2,17), the other tent was no longer needed. Furthermore, the opening of Leviticus continues the narrative from the closing verses of Exodus.

The 'glory cloud', the evidence of the Lord's presence, had settled first on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:11,16–20; 20:21; 24:15–18). This same cloud now covered the recently erected tabernacle and God's glory filled the place (see Exodus 40:34–38). Moses could no longer enter at will because of the Lord's presence. He needed to await the divine summons as he had done previously (Exodus 24:16). Leviticus begins with that call and thus Moses continued to meet with God and to receive further revelation, only now it was from within the tabernacle (see Exodus 25:22; Numbers 7:89).

God is everywhere (see Psalm 139:7), yet he has freely chosen to associate himself with one place more than another. Although the heaven of heavens cannot contain God (1 Kings 8:27), he is described as being 'in heaven' (Ecclesiastes 5:2) and Jesus taught his disciples to pray, 'Our Father in heaven' (Matthew 6:9). Heaven is spoken of as God's home (John 14:2). This would suggest that God's presence and glory are experienced in heaven more than anywhere else in all creation. Home for God is in that place where he has ordained to display his stunning importance as nowhere else.

Solomon asks a profound question in his prayer at the dedication of the temple: 'But will God indeed dwell on the earth?' (1 Kings 8:27). Can God have a second home? Is it possible for God to live in this sinful world? This is one of the great themes

of the Bible. God was specially present in paradise (Genesis 3:8). The tabernacle and later the temple in Jerusalem were reminders of the garden in Eden and also a reflection of God's heavenly home. In Jesus Christ God did dwell on the earth in the person of his Son: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt [literally, "tabernacled"] among us, and we beheld his glory ...' (John 1:14). Those who belong to Jesus Christ are individually temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19) and, corporately, the people of God are a living temple where God ordains that he will reside in a special way (1 Corinthians 3:17; 2 Corinthians 6:16). To anyone who loves the Lord and obeys his word, Jesus promises that he and his Father 'will come to him and make our home [literally, "dwelling"] with him' (John 14:23; cf. 14:2). In the new creation, heaven and earth are one and it will be loudly proclaimed: 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them ...' (Revelation 21:3). What privileged people Christians are! Do you know something of the felt presence of God in your life and when you meet together with other Christians for worship?

### **God's prophet**

Leviticus opens and concludes with a reference to Moses: '*the LORD called to Moses*' (1:1) and '*the LORD commanded Moses*' (27:34). In fact, the name of Moses is mentioned whenever a new section of material is introduced. He is the mediator of the covenant that God made with Israel. The book of Exodus has emphasized the place of Moses as the great prophet of the Lord. He was God's spokesman. The Israelites did not wish to hear the direct voice of God again after the Ten Commandments had been given and pleaded that Moses should act as their intermediary (Exodus 20:19). Thus Moses declared God's will to the people. He is the Old Testament prophet *par excellence* and all true prophets of the Lord were to speak and act in line with what God had revealed to Moses.

There is only one prophet greater than Moses and he is Jesus the Christ. He is a prophet like Moses whom the Lord knew face to face, but he is worthy 'of more glory than Moses' for he is the unique Son of the Father (Hebrews 3:3; John 1:1,14). On the mountain where Jesus was transfigured, God the Father's voice was heard from the cloud: 'This is my beloved Son. Hear him!' (Mark 9:7). Instead of a substitute voice, in Jesus we have the voice of God in the flesh.

The voice of Jesus spoke and taught as someone with authority, and not like the scribes. His disciples were dumbfounded. The people were astonished and glorified God, who had given such authority to men. This selfsame Jesus said, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations ...' (Matthew 28:18-19).

From the dissonant, confusing voices of this world, have you heard the commanding voice of Jesus: 'Follow me!' Have you come under his authority?

Have you heard the Saviour calling  
All to leave and follow him?  
Have you felt his person drawing  
With compulsion lives to win?<sup>3</sup>

### **God's people**

God communicated through Moses to '*the children* [literally, "sons"] *of Israel*'. Exodus has shown how the descendants of Jacob have become a very large body of people. It was this enormous company that God redeemed out of Egypt. He adopted them to be his 'firstborn' son and selected them to be his unique people, joining them together to form a nation set apart for himself.

They were to be God's personal treasure on earth, a nation ruled by God and having a priestly role in the world (Exodus 19:5-6). The formal covenant confirmation and consecration ceremony setting them apart for this worldwide mission is described in Exodus 24:3-8. Leviticus shows how Israel's unique status was to be worked out in daily life, where in every detail they were to express their position as God's people, serving him in a right and honourable way.

All this was in fulfilment of promises that God had originally made to Abraham with a view to the coming of Christ and his rule. Israel is a pale shadow in the Old Testament period of the true Israel of God. In the first place, Jesus himself is the fulfilment of all that the nation of Israel failed to be. He was the real servant of the Lord and a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:1-7). Simeon had this in mind as he held the baby Jesus and spoke of him as 'a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel' (Luke 2:32).

We are also taught that all who put their faith in Jesus Christ fulfil Israel's destiny. Those who are the new creation in Christ belong to Abraham and are the Israel of God (Galatians 3:26-29; 6:15-16). Christians are the elect people of God (1 Peter 1:2), who can be described in the same language that was originally used of the Israelites: 'You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God ...' (1 Peter 2:9-10). God's rule on earth at present is to be seen in the obedient lives of those who belong to Jesus Christ. Christians are to exercise their priestly calling by being light and salt, showing to the world a better way and that the gospel does work.

**God's directives**

It was to this newly formed nation that God gave further directives. Before the detailed rules concerning sacrifice are set out, the Lord through Moses presented Israel with a general case: '*When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD ...*' The word translated '*anyone*' is 'human being' (*adam*) and therefore refers to male and female (see Genesis 1:27; 5:2). As we shall see later, women as well as men were required to offer sacrifice, so it is fitting for inclusive language to be used.<sup>4</sup> The phrase also reminds us that the law at this point is dealing with voluntary sacrifices made by individual Israelites. They are personal in nature. National mandatory public sacrifices, such as the daily and festival offerings, are treated separately (see Numbers 28–29; Leviticus 16; 23).

This reminds us that, although the Lord's people are to recognize that they belong together as a nation, each individual is not lost in the group. There are personal sacrifices to be made. Each person is significant in God's sight and each is to worship God in a way that is agreeable to him. We cannot do what we like and expect God to accept whatever we might feel appropriate. There is a right and wrong way to worship. Cain thought he could do what he liked, but God was not pleased with him and what he brought. Here God directs his people that they might offer to God what is acceptable.

**God's sacrifices*****Costly giving***

In this introductory ruling the main point is that animal sacrifices were normally to be made from '*the livestock*'. Those creatures living in the wild were therefore excluded. More specifically we are told that blood offerings were to be taken



from the herds of cattle and the flocks of sheep and goats. This would suggest the costly nature of the offerings. It would not do to present to the Lord some offering that a person happened to find and kill in the open countryside. It must come from the offerer's 'own pocket'. The people would experience some loss as they deliberately gave up what belonged to them. When we think of sacrifices today this is generally what we have in mind. Something valuable is given up for the benefit of others. In our worship, whether publicly or privately, do we offer to God what costs us little? David was insistent, in his negotiations over the site where he was to rear an altar, that he would not offer to the Lord that which had cost him nothing (2 Samuel 24:24).

### ***An act of worship***

But sacrifice in the Bible means more than giving away something valuable. It is a religious activity, where someone offers something 'to the LORD'. The Hebrew word for 'offering' (*qorban*) is the general term for gifts and offerings made to God. It is related to the verb 'to bring near, to approach'. These gifts are to be 'brought near' to the Lord.<sup>5</sup> Jesus referred to this technical word for gift, 'Corban', in his condemnation of the Pharisees (see Mark 7:11).

In the pagan world around them, sacrifices were being made to all kinds of gods, but the Israelites were instructed to bring their offerings 'to the LORD'. They were to sacrifice to no other God but Jehovah (Yahweh). Our worship as Christians is directed to this same God who has saved us through his Son, Jesus Christ: 'Worship God!' (Revelation 19:10).

Sacrifice often involved the death of a victim. The following chapters consider the main sacrifices ordained by God, their significance at the time and what we can learn from them for

today. In general, the sacrificial system was set up to maintain the special relationship which God had with Israel and to heal breaches in that covenant bond. It was not to be used in a mechanical way. The people were not to behave like pagans, thinking that God thrived on such offerings, or that outward devotion could be substituted for heart religion (e.g. 1 Samuel 15:22; Amos 5:21-24).

### ***Fellowship with God***

Sacrifice was ordained to provide access to God and to remove defilement so that fellowship with God could be maintained. Our English word 'sacrifice' is associated with the words 'sacred' and 'sanctify'. In a book the main theme of which is holiness, or sacredness, it is a most appropriate term in drawing attention to this important element concerning the offerings. The holy God had ordained that he would live among them in the tent of meeting and therefore it was essential for the tabernacle, the priests and the people to be clean from every defilement. The principle is the same in the New Testament. In order for us to have fellowship with God and one another, the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ God's Son is necessary to cleanse us from all sin (1 John 1:5-9).

It was God who ordained these sacrifices and ultimately he is the one who provided them. The blood and grain offerings were from his creation. He instructed the people which items to offer. They were not to think that they were offering God something he needed in order to exist. In David's great prayer at the time when the people offered so willingly all the gifts for the building of the temple in Jerusalem, he acknowledged God's greatness, that all in heaven and in earth was God's: 'For all things come from you, and of your own we have given you' (1 Chronicles 29:14). The ultimate sacrifice is God's, who gave his very heart in

the person of his Son so that we might live with him. We cannot give anything to God to ransom our souls (Psalm 49:7-8). We are to embrace the Saviour whom God has given to bring us to himself.